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ABSTRACT

According to data from the 1985 Agricultural Work Force Survey, over 13.5 million of the 17.6 million agricultural work force household members (77 percent) lived in households headed by a farm worker. Some farm workers worked on the farm as their primary job, whereas others primarily worked off the farm. Farm work was an occasional form of employment for an additional group of workers, primarily students and homemakers who were unemployed or not in the labor force most of the year. Most agricultural work force households do not depend totally on farm work for income. Thus, farm income cannot be completely equated with household income. Farm workers primarily employed in farm work headed about 29 percent of all agricultural work force households. Over one-third of all farm workers, or 5 million people, lived in these households, including almost half of all farm operators, 35 percent of all hired farm workers, and only 20 percent of all unpaid farm workers. Only 23 percent of those living in agricultural work force households actually lived on a farm. The more people depended on farm work for employment, the greater the likelihood of their living on a farm. (MN)

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# Agricultural Work Force Households: How Much Do They Depend on Farming?

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*Loss of farm employment or low farm income would not equally affect the 5.6 million U.S. agricultural work force households and their 17.6 million members. These are households in which any member does any kind of farmwork at any time during the year. Most affected by a loss of farm employment or low farm income would be the 1.6 million households (more than 5 million people) of which the head is primarily a farmworker. When farm employment opportunities disappear or farm income is low, heads of these households would likely seek jobs in the nonfarm sector, increasing pressure on the nonfarm labor market, particularly in sparsely settled areas. Sixty-seven percent of all agricultural work force households would be little affected, since no one in the household depends primarily on farmwork for employment. Another 4 percent of the households depend only moderately on farmwork, with some member other than the head of household working primarily on a farm. Data are based on the 1985 Agricultural Work Force Survey (AWFS).*

The overall drop in agricultural employment in recent decades could continue, depending on changes in technology, the structure of agriculture, immigration policy, and farm legislation. Besides declining labor needs, the agricultural work force has also faced periodic low income from farming. This report identifies the number of households and individuals most affected by changes in farm employment and income.

## Who Makes Up the Agricultural Work Force?

The maximum number potentially affected by changes in farm employment and income are the 17.6 million people living in agricultural work force households. Farmworkers were the slightly more than 8 million people 14 years or older who did some kind of farmwork on U.S. farms in 1985. They either operated a farm, did hired farmwork, or did unpaid farmwork (table 1). Unpaid farmworkers (who may be family members, neighbors, or friends) are those who worked on a farm without receiving cash wages or salary, but may have received a "token" cash allowance, room and board, or payment-in-kind.

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Some farmworkers did more than one type of farmwork during 1985. Over 1 million workers, or 12 percent of all farmworkers, worked at two or more types of farm jobs, including 77,000 (1 percent) who did all three at some time during the year: operating a farm and doing both hired and unpaid farmwork. To avoid double-counting these people, we grouped individuals by their major farm job, the job each person worked at the most days in 1985. By this definition, there were 2.8 million farm operators, 2.2 million hired farmworkers, and 3 million unpaid farmworkers.

Data on number of farm operators in this report differ from data on the number of farms reported by statistical series which use the farm and not the operator as the unit of analysis. USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service counted 2,275,000 U.S. farms in 1985, while the Census of Agriculture reported 2,241,000 farms in 1982. The number of farm operators includes everyone who said that they operated a farm during the year. Thus, this number may be greater than the number of farms since there may be more than one farm operator per farm business. Data from the 1985 AWFS show that over half a million households had more than one farm operator.

## Who Heads Agricultural Work Force Households?

Over 13.5 million of the 17.6 million agricultural work force household members, or 77 percent, lived in

households headed by a farmworker. The remainder lived in agricultural work force households headed by someone other than a farmworker (table 2).

Most farmworkers either headed a household or resided in a household headed by a farmworker. Farmworkers headed 81 percent of the 5.6 million agricultural work force households. Persons other than farmworkers headed about 1.1 million of all agricultural work force households.

Forty-five percent of the 8.1 million farmworkers lived in households headed by a farm operator, 24 percent in a household headed by an unpaid farmworker, and 16 percent in a household headed by a hired farmworker. Fifteen percent of all farmworkers lived in a household not headed by a farmworker.

## Which Households Depend Most On Farmwork?

Some farmworkers worked on the farm as their primary job, while others primarily worked off the farm. Farmwork is occasional employment for an additional group of workers, primarily students and homemakers, who were unemployed or not in the labor force most of the year. Most agricultural work force households do not totally depend on farmwork for income and therefore we cannot equate farm income with household income.

Primary employment was the labor force activity worked at the most during 1985. This differs from major farm activity, which is the farm job worked at for the most days during the year. Most persons who worked on the farm in 1985 did not consider farmwork their primary employment; that is, the majority of these individuals worked primarily at some nonfarmwork activity or were not in the labor force for most of the year.

**Table 1—The agricultural work force, 1985**

| Characteristic | Number |
|---|---|
| | *Thousands* |
| Agricultural work force[1] | 8,061 |
| Total farm operators | 2,889 |
| Operated farm only | 2,203 |
| Did hired farmwork | 148 |
| Did unpaid farmwork | 461 |
| Did hired and unpaid farmwork | 77 |
| Operated farm as major farm job | 2,818 |
| Total hired farmworkers | 2,522 |
| Did hired farmwork only | 1,933 |
| Operated a farm | 148 |
| Did unpaid farmwork | 364 |
| Operated a farm and did unpaid farmwork | 77 |
| Did hired farmwork as major farm job | 2,220 |
| Total unpaid farmworkers | 3,777 |
| Did unpaid farmwork only | 2,875 |
| Did hired farmwork | 364 |
| Operated a farm | 461 |
| Did hired farmwork and operated a farm | 77 |
| Did unpaid farmwork as major farm job | 3,023 |

[1]Total number of individuals in the agricultural work force adjusted for double counting among worker categories.

### The Agricultural Work Force Survey

The Agricultural Work Force Survey (AWFS), supplying the data for this report, was conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, in December 1985 as a supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS).[1] The AWFS included everyone who had worked on a farm at any time during 1985. The 1985 AWFS provided the first comprehensive data on number and characteristics of agricultural work force households.

The AWFS collected data on 5,800 people, which included everyone 14 years or older living in agricultural work force households in the sample who operated a farm, did farmwork for cash wages or salary, or who worked on farms without pay at any time during the year. Data collected included age, sex, racial/ethnic origin, education, number of days worked at all farm and nonfarm jobs during the year, earnings from farm and nonfarm employment, overnight migration to different counties or States to do paid farmwork, and the principal crop or livestock worked with the most during the year.

AWFS may underestimate the total number of hired farmworkers for several reasons. Both foreign and domestic workers do hired farmwork. The AWFS provides good coverage of domestic farmworkers, but counted few illegal aliens who did farmwork, because they either returned home before the survey was conducted in December or avoided being counted due to their illegal status. Also, AWFS did not count foreign nationals who legally did hired farmwork but returned home before the survey was conducted. About 21,000 U.S. farm jobs were certified for foreign workers under the U.S. Department of Labor's H-2 program in 1985.

[1] For more information on the CPS, see: *The Current Population Survey: Design and Methodology*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Technical Paper 40.

Forty-five percent of farm operators worked primarily at farmwork, compared with 32 percent of the hired farmworkers and only 6 percent of the unpaid farmworkers (table 3). We assume households where the head was primarily employed in farmwork depended most heavily on farmwork for employment (high dependence) (table 4). Farmworkers primarily employed in farmwork headed about 29 percent of all agricultural work force households. Over one-third of all farmworkers, or 5 million people, lived in these households, including almost half of all farm operators, 35 percent of all hired farmworkers, and only 20 percent of all unpaid farmworkers.

About 4 percent of those in agricultural work force households depended moderately on farmwork for employment. This meant that someone other than the head of the house relied on farmwork for their primary employment.

The 3.8 million agricultural work force households in which no one cited farmwork as their primary employment had 11.8 million residents (low dependence). Thus, about 67 percent of the agricultural work force households depended little on farmwork for employment and would not be much affected by future declines in farm jobs. About 46 percent of all farm operators, 59 percent of all hired farmworkers, and 78 percent of unpaid farmworkers lived in these households.

## How Many Farmworkers Live On Farms?

A surprisingly small proportion (23 percent) of persons living in agricultural work force households actually lived on a farm (table 4) (a farm is defined as a place in a rural area selling $1,000 or more of agricultural products during the preceding year). The more a person depended on farmwork for employment, the greater the likelihood of living on a farm. Fifty-three percent of the persons whose head of household was primarily a farmworker lived on a farm, compared with 23 percent of the persons in households where someone other than the head was primarily a farmworker. In agricultural work force households where no one was primarily a farmworker, only 11 percent of the people resided on a farm.

**Table 2—Agricultural work force households, 1985[1]**

| Characteristic | Headed by— | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Farm operator | Hired farmworker | Unpaid farmworker | Nonagricultural worker | Total |
| | *Thousands* | | | | |
| Agricultural work force households | 2,079 | 938 | 1,504 | 1,060 | 5,582 |
| Total agricultural work force population | 6,365 | 2,974 | 4,188 | 4,069 | 17,596 |
| Farmworkers | 3,635 | 1,275 | 1,962 | 1,189 | 8,061 |
| Farm operators | 2,673 | 4 | 32 | 109 | 2,818 |
| Hired farmworkers | 218 | 1,220 | 37 | 745 | 2,220 |
| Unpaid farmworkers | 744 | 51 | 1,893 | 335 | 3,023 |
| Children less than 14 years old | 1,263 | 843 | 1,108 | 666 | 3,880 |

[1]Data may not add to total due to rounding.

**Table 3—Primary employment status of the agricultural work force, 1985**

| Characteristic | Major farmwork activity | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Farm operators | Hired farmworkers | Unpaid farmworkers |
| | *Thousands* | | |
| Total agricultural work force | 2,818 | 2,220 | 3,023 |
| | *Percent* | | |
| Primary employment: | | | |
| Farmwork | 45.4 | 32.3 | 5.9 |
| Nonfarmwork | 36.4 | 22.1 | 55.0 |
| Unemployed or not in labor force | 18.2 | 45.6 | 39.1 |

**Table 4—Agricultural work force households, by dependence on farmwork for employment, 1985**

| Characteristic | Dependence on farmwork for employment[1] | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High | Moderate | Low | |
| | *Thousands* | | | |
| Agricultural work force households | 1,624 | 196 | 3,761 | 5,582[2] |
| Total population | 5,123 | 722 | 11,751 | 17,596 |
| Farmworkers | 2,772 | 326 | 4,963 | 8,061 |
| Farm operators | 1,385 | 138 | 1,295 | 2,818 |
| Hired farmworkers | 788 | 129 | 1,303 | 2,220 |
| Unpaid farmworkers | 599 | 59 | 2,365 | 3,023 |
| Children less than 14 years old | 1,141 | 88 | 2,650 | 3,880 |
| Farm residents | 2,719 | 168 | 1,244 | 4,132 |

[1]High-dependent households were those in which the head was primarily a farmworker. Moderate-dependent households were those in which someone other than the head was primarily a farmworker. Low-dependent households were those in which no one was primarily a farmworker. [2]Data may not add to total due to rounding.

**For Additional Information...**

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## Current Debate on Farm Policy . . .

Is based on conflicting reaction to the Food Security Act of 1985. A decision made on behalf of one group may have unanticipated or adverse effects on others. This bulletin is one in a series published by USDA's Economic Research Service aimed at informing those debating farm policy about the highly interrelated nature of agricultural policymaking. Here is a list of the reports that are available. To order these or to learn about upcoming reports, write to ERS Information, Room 208, 1301 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005-4788.

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